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SUBJECT: EU: COMMISSION TO DELAY MINSK OPENING

REF: BRUSSELS 0410

Classified By: Laurence Wohlers, Political Minister Counselor for reasons 1.4(b) and (e)

1.(C) In a March 19 discussion of Belarus with European Commission officials, Polmincouns underscored the importance of concrete EU actions to show solidarity with the United States over unacceptable Belarusian moves against the U.S. Embassy in Minsk. Following up on his March 14 meeting with DAS Kramer and Amb. Karen Stewart, Hugues Mingarelli, European Commission Deputy Director General for Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the Caucasus, informed Polmincouns that the Commission had decided to postpone the opening of the new European Commission Delegation office in Minsk on April 7. Mingarelli did not say whether the Commission had informed the Belarusian authorities or the EU Member States of this decision. He also noted that the decision on exact timing of the opening would now rest with RELEX Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner.

12. (SBU) Separately, Emma Udwin, Ferrero-Waldner's Cabinet advisor for Transatlantic Relations expressed appreciation for U.S. efforts to keep the Commission informed of our bilateral diplomacy with Minsk on sanctions, prisoner releases and the diplomatic crisis in Minsk. Udwin was especially grateful for our explanation of the March 6 Treasury public clarification of U.S. sanctions against Belneftikim. She admitted that she had mistakenly understood it constituted a new sanction. Moreover, she undertook to look further into the matter of the Commission Delegation opening with the Commissioner. (Note: Udwin had been away on travel for the last few days and was not fully apprised of the issue of the Delegation opening date. Ferrero-Waldner is now traveling outside of Brussels for the European Easter holiday. End Note.)

3.(C) On the Council side, on March 18 Polmincouns briefed separately Helga Schmid, Policy Planning Director at the Council Secretariat, and the Slovene PSC Ambassador. Schmid responded that Belarusian actions were completely unacceptable and that the EU would show solidarity. She, herself, would contact the Belarusian Ambassador to the EU on the matter. Subsequently, Schmid's office informed us that she had indeed delivered a strong message and asked the Belarusian Ambassador, who professed ignorance of the matter, to urgently provide an explanation. Also on March 18, the Slovenian Presidency had instructed the French Ambassador to Belarus (and local Presidency rep) to demarche the Belarusian Foreign Minister Martynov on March 19 at 15:00 Minsk local time. The demarche would include the following elements:

-- support for the United States Embassy in Minsk and concern for the unacceptable character of Belarusian behavior which is contrary to diplomatic rules (read: Vienna Convention)
-- notification of the EU's continued close coordination with the USG on policy toward Belarus;

-- stress on the EU,s current priority for the liberation of political prisoners in Belarus;
-- notification that EU sanctions against Belarus would soon be renewed;
-- expression of a willingness to change the EU,s point of view and adjust current sanctions policy if Alexandr Kazulin were released.

4.(C) COMMENT: The EU appears to be moving forward swiftly on our request to demonstrate solidarity with us on Belarus. Post believes a demarche to EU Member States informing them of the situation on the ground in Minsk as well as on U.S. sanctions toward Minsk could help us sustain the momentum in Brussels and in EU capitals. In highlighting our concern that the Minsk regime is trying to split the EU and United States, we may wish to draw attention to the regime's intention to choreograph an opening of an EU office in tandem with the forced drawdown or even closure of the U.S. Embassy.

However, the decision on timing ultimately rests with the RELEX Commissioner herself and not/not with the Member States. In this context, we may wish to encourage positive Member State support for the Commissioner's continued prudence on the matter. One problem here may be the logistics of coordinating action at 27 given that most Permreps and the EU institutions are in the process of shutting down for the long European Easter holiday week.
MURRAY

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